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AUTHOR Spaulding, Seth
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ABSTRACT

This document examines educational reforms that have occurred in Mongolia and Laos. Both nations have expanded educational opportunity drastically over the years. Both had extensive literacy campaigns following the establishment of socialism. Laos has undertaken development projects with the support of the USSR, Eastern European countries, and Vietnam. Mongolia, which has been closely affiliated with the USSR since the 1920s, has strong Russian and English language programs and educational exchange programs with Vietnam. The curriculum in both countries emphasizes science and technology. Both countries suffer from a scarcity of instructional materials, although both employ audiovisual aids. Mongolia and Laos recognize the need to improve teacher education. International agencies support teacher training projects, particularly in the area of secondary level mathematics and science. Both countries are the beneficiaries of overseas development assistance programs; still, both continue to face significant educational finance and administration problems. At present, Laos and Mongolia are undergoing economic liberalization. Mongolia has a tradition of trade ties with the West, and Laos resembles the free market economy of Thailand. There is little educational research in either country. Future research could explore practical issues of educational quantity, and quality, while theoretical questions of democratization and ideology remain. Glasnost and perestroika in the USSR may encourage such research. (SG)

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Educational Development and Reform on the Soviet Periphery: Mongolian People's Republic and Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Educational development and reform on the Soviet periphery: Mongolian People's Republic and Lao People's Democratic Republic

Seth Spaulding

Perestroika and *glasnost* are affecting not only the Soviet Union itself, but the many nations which have close ties with the USSR. A look at the current and recent efforts at educational development and reform in these countries may be useful in a general way in better understanding Soviet intentions in international affairs, and non-Soviet bloc nations may find significant new ways of collaborating with these countries. Educational researchers may find opportunity to track the educational reforms which seem to be transpiring parallel to significant political, economic and social reforms in many of these countries.

Clearly, the many nations which are generally considered in the Soviet bloc vary immensely in terms of the level of socio-economic development, the nature and history of relationship with the Soviet Union, geographic location, and culture and language. The comparatively well-developed countries of eastern Europe would form an interesting group for study. Some of the countries in Africa, Ethiopia and Mozambique, among others, might be interesting cases, along with liberation movements in the so-called front-line states near South Africa, many of which send large numbers of students for training in the Soviet Union or other socialist countries. Similarly, one might examine the impact on education of changing Soviet policies and relationships with a number of Arab states, or with Latin American states (Cuba and Nicaragua, in particular). There, undoubtedly, would be differences in all of these countries as well as similarities.

This exploratory paper[1] examines educational trends and issues in two socialist countries in Asia. The paper is not intended to arrive at definitive

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, Montreal, June 26-30, 1989. Others interested in education in countries generally considered to be on the Soviet periphery are encouraged to correspond with the author with a view to possible collaborative efforts.

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conclusions, but suggests some possible research directions for the future. Conceivably, with the new openness of such countries, cooperative research ventures, involving scholars from both socialist and non-socialist countries, with educators in these countries, may be possible.

Background and history

The Mongolian People's Republic (referred to below as Mongolia) and Lao PDR (referred to below as Laos) have been chosen as the countries to be examined in this paper simply because, in the recent past, I have had first-hand involvement with these countries. I have been impressed with the changes in these countries and with their interest in opening up additional opportunities in the education sector. Both are Asian countries, but each has its own distinctive history; Mongolia has been socialist since the 1920's, with a history of revolutionary struggle beginning in 1921 and culminating with the declaration of the People's Republic in 1924. Laos, in turn, became socialist only in 1975, following years of internal conflict (which has not yet been totally resolved) and occupation by foreign powers. Both countries are small in terms of population, with around two million people in Mongolia and around four million in Laos. Both are land-locked countries, and Mongolia dwarfs Laos in land mass with some 1.5 million square kilometers compared with Laos' 236,800 square kilometers. Both countries have a high rate of population growth and both have large percentages of their population of school-going-age (age 15 or below). Both countries have sizeable numbers of ethnic groups among the population and both are essentially agricultural (with a traditional emphasis on nomadic animal husbandry in Mongolia). In both countries, transportation between regions by land is difficult, with modern roads scarce. Both countries are strategically placed in terms of interests of other countries, with Mongolia separating China and the Soviet Union over many hundreds of miles, and with Laos bordering on China (200 km. of border), Burma (about 150 km. of border), Cambodia (about 200 km. of border), Thailand (over 1000 km. of border) and Vietnam (over 1000 km. of border).

From 1690 until 1911, Mongolia was governed by the Manchus, who encouraged Lamaist teachings and an essentially subsistence economy among the nomadic tribes. With the establishment of the People's Republic in 1924, the Lamaist church was separated from both government and educational activity, and, although some operating Lamaist temples still exist, they have little role to play in education. In Laos, on the other hand, the leaders of the revolutionary government have included the leaders of the Buddhist faith of Laos in discussions concerning the future of the country, and there appears little or no attempt to suppress the faith. Lao communist party leaders make it

clear that they are seeking the Lao way to socialism, and that there may be differences between the Lao way and the approach of other socialist countries.[2]

Emphasis on educational expansion

Both Mongolia and Laos have expanded educational opportunity dramatically over the years. Mongolia in the 1987-88 school year had one person in four (some 500,000 young people) in some form of general education (of a total population of around two million), with some 20,000 in specialized secondary schools and 17,000 in higher education (including day, evening and correspondence). Around two-thirds of the young people in school are in rural areas.[3]

Laos, in turn, has expanded educational opportunity dramatically since 1975, when the socialist government took power. From 1976 to 1985, the number of schools, students and teachers had increased by 77 per cent, 68.8 per cent and 82.9 per cent respectively. Primary enrolment increased by more than 50 per cent and secondary enrolment by nearly 200 per cent. By 1983-84, it was estimated that 85.4 per cent of elementary age children were in school compared to 67.5 per cent in 1975, and 13.9 per cent were in secondary school, compared to 5.2 per cent in 1975. Growth seems to have slowed since then, except in the higher education sector. Regional variations in enrolment ratios are great, and drop-out is high. In the early eighties, of one thousand children of all ages enrolled in the first grade, only 139 eventually completed the five-year primary cycle. Only about one-third of the first-graders pass to second grade and only half the second graders went on to the third.[4] Some of these problems may be because of the tremendous exodus of teachers during the period on the mid-seventies when the socialist government took control. Possibly as many as ten to twenty thousand educated Laos who stayed were sent to 're-education' camps and only in recent years are these people active again in the Lao infrastructure. Even with a dramatic increase in teacher training activity, it is still estimated (as of 1988) that about 22 per cent of some 7000 first cycle secondary teachers are not qualified.

Both countries had extensive literacy campaigns following the establishment of the socialist state. In Mongolia, this effort began in the 1920s with the establishment of elementary schools, a department of education, and an adult

[2] Joseph J. Zasloff, Professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh, and a Laos specialist, traces the Lao political leadership and its policies during the first decade or so of socialist Laos in 'Political Constraints on Development in Laos,' August 29, 1988, to appear as a chapter on contemporary Laos edited by Zasloff and Leonard Unger.

[3] From an interview with the Vice Chairman of the State Committee for Higher Education, Ulan Bator, Mongolia, 8 October, 1987.

[4] Figures in this paragraph are from : Unesco, *Social Science Research and Women in the Republique Democratique Populaire Lao*. 1987, pp. 13-18.

education program. Home teaching, traditional in Mongolia, was encouraged, and literacy was taught in the context of other state bodies, including the party, the youth league, trade unions, cooperatives, etc. The Institute for Scientific Research published in 1921 an 'ABC for Adults' and a companion volume entitled 'Light of the Rising Sun'. By 1940, still only 20 per cent of the people were literate, however, and the government decided to replace the traditional Mongolian script by Cyrillic. This appears to have made literacy efforts easier, and by 1947 some 43.3 per cent of the population was literate and by 1963, about 90 per cent.[5] Mongolia now claims universal literacy, and since 1950, all official correspondence uses the Cyrillic alphabet, even though there seems to be something of a resurgence of interest among some educated Mongolians in traditional Mongolian.

Laos, in turn, has stressed school expansion and literacy since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1975. Conditions, however, have not been as stable as in Mongolia and, of course, the socialist government has not been in power for as long as that of Mongolia. A UNESCO study, carried out in 1984-85, suggests that in the mid-eighties, in fifteen largely rural provinces, there were as many as 765,400 illiterates in the 15-45 age group, or roughly 56 per cent of the total population of these 15 provinces. In other provinces which are more highly developed the literacy rate may be as low as 30 per cent (especially in the national and provincial capitals).[6] Clearly, literacy among the various rural ethnic groups in Laos is high, and the country as a whole ranks with the most illiterate of Asian and Pacific countries.

Bilateral relationships and language problems

Both have many relationships with other socialist nations; this leads to language problems of a somewhat different nature in each country. In Laos, there have been numerous development projects backstopped by the USSR, Eastern European countries and Vietnam, with experts drawn from those countries and with students sent to those countries. Some 11,000 Laotian students were sent abroad from 1975 to 1985, and some 5,000 had returned by then. The largest group had gone to the Soviet Union, followed by East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Mongolia and Cuba, with smaller numbers to Australia, Japan, Sweden and France. These students return with the language of those countries and become largely dependent on technical literature from those countries. French and English are still strong, especially among those who were educated before the current government was installed

[5] Information from *Eradicating Illiteracy: The Experience of the Mongolian People's Republic*, an undated typewritten report provided to the author by the Ministry of Education in Ulan Bator, October, 1987.

[6] *Social Science Research and Women in the Republique Democratique Populaire Lao*, Unesco, 1987. p. 12.

in 1975. In Mongolia, in turn, the close relationship with the Soviet Union since the twenties has led to almost universal acceptance of Russian as a second language among the educated, although English is a strong runner-up in recent years. Although many projects between Eastern European countries and Mongolia exist, plus some between Mongolia and Laos and Vietnam, communication with experts from other socialist countries generally appears to be in the Russian language.

Laos has strong ties with Vietnam, with large numbers of Vietnamese experts and with sizeable numbers of students trained in Vietnam during the past ten years or so. Most Laotians do not understand Vietnamese, making it difficult when Vietnamese and Lao educators work together. On the other hand, the Lao and Thai languages are closely related and Thais and Laos generally can understand each other. Until recently, however, relationships have been cool to hostile between the Thai and Lao governments. This has changed dramatically within the past couple of years, with joint conferences between Thai military and police authorities and with a number of friendly negotiations taking place between the two countries. Some time ago, a refugee camp at Nong Khai, Thailand, just across the river from the Lao capital, Vientiane, was moved inland so as to make it less accessible to Lao nationals who may wish to leave the country by crossing the river to the camp. Clearly, the bilateral relationships between socialist and non-socialist countries in the region are in something of a state of flux and appear to be broadening rapidly.[7]

Mongolia, in turn, has, in recent years, been somewhat hostile to China, with many Soviet and Mongolian troops defending the border with China. This tension is easing, however, and the overnight train ride from Ulan Bator to Beijing may become a busy route. Mongolians, of course, do not have pleasant memories of many of the Chinese warlords who occupied portions of their country in the past, and relationships with China may remain cool (though much less hostile than in the past) for some time to come.

Curriculum emphasis on science and technology

The curriculum in both countries seems to be influenced by educational reform cycles in the Soviet Union. Both countries stress science and technology, a recurrent theme in Soviet reforms, with the apparent notion that students with appropriate scientific training will be good for development.

The most recent curriculum innovation parallels the Soviet Union's interest in computer literacy in the schools. Since the mid-eighties, both Mongolia and Laos have decided that secondary-school students should be

[7] In cases where information is not footnoted, the material is from field notes taken during project evaluation missions to Mongolia, October 1-17, 1987; and Laos (October 25-November 4, 1988).

taught computer literacy. This seems to mean that students should learn how computers work and something about how to program computers. Both seem to use adaptations of instructional materials about computers available in the Soviet Union and in western countries, including the United States, but these materials appear to emphasize content on how computers work and how they are programmed rather than content oriented toward getting students to use available programs in useful contexts. This is understandable since neither country seems to have confronted the massive problem of equipping their many secondary schools with computers and appropriate software. Nor have they clarified in their own minds exactly how the majority of secondary school students are expected to make use of computer literacy, either while they are students or after they graduate.

In Mongolia, clearly the more affluent of the two countries, the higher education institutions have a variety of computers, but none of the secondary schools, as of 1988, seemed to have any. The Superior Pedagogical Institute (responsible for preparing secondary school teachers, along with the smaller Khovd Pedagogical Institute at the western end of the country) had, as of early 1988, eight Apple IIes, selected largely because of their ease of use in school work and two Iskra (Soviet) computers, used largely for administrative purposes. The Mongolian State Polytechnic Institute has begun a Microtronics Design Bureau and has five laboratories, thirty specialist technicians, and twenty IBM micro-computers (some ATs and some XTs) and sixteen Bulgarian-made computers, all of which are used for engineering and management systems work; the Medical Institute has four IBMs; the State University, eight Apple compatibles and three IBM XTs; and the State Pedagogical Institute at Khovd, one Apple IIe. This, essentially, was the extent of computer hardware available in the entire country. Yet, in 1988, computer literacy was to be introduced in all the secondary schools, some 130 General Secondary and forty vocational. Many of these schools have up to 2000 students, with some seventy teachers, with over fifty classes in two shifts. In such schools, one might suggest at least one classroom with ten computers in order to make a beginning at teaching computer literacy. This would imply the purchase of some 1700 computers, with appropriate software, a maintenance system, and related teacher training. Clearly, such investment is not feasible, and the Superior Pedagogical Institute in Ulan Bator is attempting to establish a computer clearing-house to disseminate information about computers in education and to prepare videotapes and other teaching materials about computers for use in secondary schools.

In October, 1987, the Ministry of Education in Mongolia sponsored its first international seminar on the use of computers in education. This was held at the Khovd Pedagogical Institute, in Khovd, a provincial capital in the west of Mongolia. The seminar was chaired by the Vice Chairman of the State Committee for Higher Education, and was attended by faculty, staff and

foreign experts from several of the higher education institutions in Mongolia. Experts were from the Soviet Union and the Ukraine. Recommendations included the notion of some kind of centralization of computer policy under the Ministry of Higher Education, with some standardization of equipment to be used; need to define more clearly what teachers in secondary schools need to know in order to use computers as pedagogical devices as well as to teach about computers; and that the pedagogical institutes should have a major role to play in developing future computer policies. There appeared to be emphasis on the use of the computer in automization control in industry and on computers for number-crunching, rather than for such tasks as word-processing, personal productivity and time management, filing and achieving, etc.[8]

In Laos, the emphasis on science and technology is equally clear. For some years, a UNDP-funded UNESCO project has been assisting the Higher Pedagogical Institute (the closest thing Laos has to a university) in upgrading its science and technology curriculum. Backstopping this project have been a team of Hungarians, who have sent young Lao faculty to Hungary for advanced training in the sciences and, to some degree, in pedagogy. This project has laid the groundwork for upgrading the Institute to a full-fledged university, although a polytechnic has been in the competition for that status, as well.

At the Pedagogical Institute are several Apple computers in the sciences area, but there is a scarcity of good programs. The computers seem to be used primarily by the few staff trained in such work, and there is little evidence that most students are able to do much with them. At the same time, there is a language project assisted by the United Nations Development Program and UNESCO, which seems to run somewhat independently of other foreign-assisted projects, and which is using computers and other teaching devices for language teaching. Clearly, there is little overall policy-setting concerning such matters as computer infrastructure for the institution.

Scarcity of teaching materials

Of some eighty-three upper secondary schools in Laos, two are located in Vientiane, the capital, and in one of these, Lycée Sikhottabong, there is only one text of manual for every five or six students. There is little teaching equipment of material other than laboratory equipment provided by Hungary as a gift; which is located in one room which appears not to be used regularly. Once out of Vientiane, the schools at all levels operate without electricity and teaching materials are usually limited to one textbook per teacher (rather than one for each five students as in the capital).

[8] From notes taken by the author during the seminar, Khovd, 13 October, 1987.

The problem of teaching materials for schools is complicated by the way the materials have been developed and made available. The government's Institute de Recherche Pédagogie is in charge of preparing the curriculum (a new one has been under preparation for some time and is due to be introduced soon) and for authorizing texts. These, in turn, are made available to the provinces for purchase. Most provinces can purchase very few. The materials themselves seem to demonstrate some problems by virtue of the long, circuitous route by which they arrive in Laos. The Institute is advised by a group of Vietnamese educators who, in turn, have borrowed many materials from elsewhere, but primarily from Soviet and Eastern European sources. Finally, there appears to be relatively little coordination between the Institut de Recherche, which prepares the curriculum for the upper secondary schools and the Higher Pedagogical Institute which prepares the teachers.

Both Mongolia and Laos have experimented with various forms of educational media and technology. For instance, in Laos, the Pedagogical Institute has a battery powered videocam which it uses to record the performance of student teachers in rural schools which have no electricity. A van carries a portable generator so that teachers doing student teaching can view their performance on the spot and discuss it with supervisors. It is somewhat incongruous to visit a rural school where this adaptation of microteaching is underway in a school with little in the way of textbooks or teaching materials, other than a chalkboard.

In Mongolia, both higher education establishments and some secondary schools have multi-media projection facilities available in the classrooms. These seem reminiscent of the sixties and earlier in western countries when there was great enthusiasm for 'audiovisual aids' and 'multi-media presentations'. In fact, if one examines the educational technology manuals used in both Mongolia and Laos, it becomes obvious that there is much which is drawn from western educational literature of the sixties, with its enthusiasm for well-planned projection facilities, the use of instructional television, slides, models and other audiovisual aids, and, in teacher training, the enthusiasm for microteaching. It is particularly ludicrous in Laos, however, with no electricity and very limited teaching equipment and materials in the vast majority of schools, to see teachers in preparation studying an educational technology handbook which goes into great detail about how sixteen millimeter projectors work, how to calculate the appropriate screen dimensions and seating arrangements for a well-designed projection room, and how to design appropriate overhead transparencies for school use. Mongolia, on the other hand, has elaborately designed multi-media projection facilities in many of the secondary schools and in most of the universities. The better developed infrastructure in Mongolia permits the use of these more elaborate facilities.

Teachers and teacher education

Both countries recognize the need for improved and expanded teacher training. Both have had UNDP/UNESCO supported teacher training projects emphasizing the areas of science and mathematics at the secondary education level. Each of these projects have been staffed almost exclusively with experts from the Soviet Union or eastern European countries (largely Hungary, in the case of Laos). In Mongolia, the project has, in effect, strengthened the State Pedagogical Institute at Ulan Bator, which is one of seven higher education institutions in the country and which has a student population of over 2,000. Since its inception in 1951, over 10,000 teachers have been prepared, mostly at the secondary level. Three of the other six higher education institutions also prepare secondary school teachers. Despite these continuing efforts, officials in Mongolia report that there is a scarcity of teachers of physics, mathematics, labor activities, foreign language and physical education.[9] Part of the shortage may be due to the attraction of more attractive job opportunities in government or industries for those with such training.

In Laos, upper secondary teachers are prepared primarily at the Higher Pedagogical Institute at Dong Dok (near the capital, Vientiane) which was established in 1959, and which, in 1988, changed its name to University Pedagogical Institute. The plan seems to be to convert the Institute into a full-fledged university. Enrolment at Dong Dok increased dramatically from 309 in 1975-76 (the first year of the socialist government) to 2,411 in the 1987-88 school year. Enrolment in Dong Dok is by quota, with each province receiving a certain number of places. There is about a 20 per cent dropout rate, and many who complete the course (especially those in languages) go into positions in the various government ministries instead of into teaching.

Secondary school teachers' salaries are minimal; as of 1988, they were paid (at the then current exchange rate) about US$1.00 per month plus a coupon book worth about US$10.00 for rations at controlled prices. A more or less straight salary system began in the fall of 1989, though it is not clear whether this will improve the economic situation of teachers or otherwise, since the purchasing power of the coupon books (which are no longer being issued) was relatively high, compared to open market prices of commodities. Further affecting teacher supply is the plan to convert the Institute into a full-fledged university, thus possibly diminishing the emphasis on pre-service and in-service training.

As in Mongolia, in Laos there is some loss of better students enrolled in teacher training to other professions. Those with languages, for instance, often go into government ministries; those with scientific skills enter various kinds of governmental or private business.[10]

[9] Also from the interview with the Vice Chairman of the State Committee for Higher Education cited in footnote 5, above.

[10] From an interview with the Director, Department of General Secondary Education, Ministry of Education, Vientiane, October 29, 1988.

In both Mongolia and Laos, the need for in-service teacher training is recognized, especially with curriculum reforms stressing science, technology and computer literacy. Both conduct numerous in-service courses for teachers, both at the teacher training institutions and in the field. There are those who question, however, the efficacy of these programs for improving education considering the fact that the teachers return to school environments which are extremely limited in terms of resources.

The impact of foreign aid

Both Mongolia and Laos receive substantial amounts from overseas development assistance programs, both bilateral and multilateral. In the case of Mongolia, this has traditionally come through the various relationships with the Soviet Union and eastern European countries. For instance, there is an industrial city, Darkhan, less than a day's drive north of Ulan Bator, the capital, which has worked with the Soviet Union and socialist countries throughout eastern Europe in developing a variety of industries, and these, with industries in Ulan Bator and some provincial cities, are creating a need for sizeable numbers of scientific and technical specialists in the future.

Similarly, in Laos, there are plans to develop a number of industrial enterprises in cooperation with foreign donors, though the industrial base is much smaller than that in Mongolia. Both countries continue to depend heavily on rural, agricultural and traditional occupations for their gross national product. Mongolia, however, exports much of its agricultural product (I was told by a government official that they provide 10 per cent of the meat supplies of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe), while Laos has only recently become self-sufficient in rice after many years of having to supplement local supplies of that staple with imports.

Most bilateral and multilateral projects in Mongolia (the latter mostly sponsored under the United Nations Development Program and advised by UN specialized agencies) have, in the past, depended largely on Soviet and eastern European experts. These experts, however, are relatively few in number. Aid does not appear to be increasing rapidly in Mongolia, perhaps because of a reasonably healthy economy, a pool of well-trained Mongolians in most areas, and a longstanding stable government. Bilateral assistance seems to concentrate on cooperative industrial projects which seem to operate somewhat along the lines of joint ventures in western capitalist countries. At the same time, the Mongolian authorities appear to be open to discussions concerning the broadening of cooperative relationships to include countries not normally active in providing technical cooperation in the country. For example, the United States, for the first time since the establishment of the Mongolian state, has agreed to establish an embassy in Ulan Bator and the Mongolians see this

as a sign of the possibility of increased intellectual and development cooperation between the two countries.

Aid across the board appears to be increasing dramatically in Laos. United Nations Development program funds earmarked for the country, increased from $19.3 million in 1977-81, to $37.9 million for the 1987-91 country programming period. In addition, WHO, FAO, UN Fund for Population Activities, UNICEF and the World Food Program have projects in the country. Among the OECD nations, Australia, France, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have been active in providing aid, and Japanese involvement has shown a dramatic increase (from $1.7 million in 1984 to 7.5 million in 1985, for instance).[11] The IDA has provided modest inputs, and the Asian Development Bank, in mid-1989, undertook a major education sector study which may lead to a sizeable involvement of the Bank in education projects. Such involvement will inevitably bring in more technical cooperation staff from western, non-socialist countries, including Thailand, which until recently has had limited relationships with Laos. The United States maintains a mission in Laos, but apparently is not negotiating any major assistance programs for the future.

The complex impact of major involvement of foreign donors in education can be illustrated by the 1988-89 mix of faculty members at the Higher Pedagogical Institute in Laos. Of 261 faculty members during the 1988-89 school year, 194 were Laos and sixty-seven were of other nationalities: forty-six were from USSR; one Czech; twelve Vietnamese; three Hungarians; one Bulgarian; one Mongolian; one Indian; one Canadian; and one French. Fifteen of the foreign faculty were specialists in Marxism/Leninism (eight Soviets and seven Vietnamese) a department which handles pedagogical work, as well as ideology.[12] Specialists in the various sciences and in mathematics indicate that there is little coordination between the substantive departments and the Marxism/Leninism department in terms of pedagogy; the various subject-matter departments handle their own specialized pedagogy.

Educational finance and administration

Both countries have significant problems in financing and administering the educational system. Mongolia is a sparsely populated country which must draw the young people together to attend schools in small villages throughout the country. The difficulty in supervising and providing services to these schools is

[11] UNDP, *Socio-Economic, Monetary and Resource Tables (Smart Profiles)*, August, 1987 (1987-1991 indicative planning figure for UNDP expenditure in Laos updated from more recent information provided in Laos in October, 1988).

[12] Figures from chart: *Institute Universitaire du Pedagogie-Vientiane*, Ande Universitaire '88-89, Ministère de l'Education, Vientiane, provided the author in an interview at the Institute on October 26, 1988.

immense. To illustrate: in late October, 1987, I was visiting Khovd, a provincial capital and the largest town in western Mongolia, where the teacher training institute for the region is located. For three days, we were stranded in the town because of snow and bad weather. Virtually the only feasible means of transportation between most regions of Mongolia is by air, and many of the villages have no airport.

Similar conditions of difficult access exist in Laos, even though the country is not a large as Mongolia and even though the problems do not include snowstorms. The situation is further complicated by the fact that there are still some problems of security in some provinces of Laos. Regular communication from Vientiane, the capital, and most schools in the rural areas is not possible.

The situation is further complicated by the policy of the Lao government to "decentralize" elementary and secondary education. This means that the central government will provide little in the way of resources for the schools; the provincial governments must provide the schools with most of the operational expense, and generally manage the schools in their provinces. Officials of the central government feel that the provinces can put more resources into the schools and point out that most communities spend more in constructing and maintaining pagodas and communities of monks than they do in supporting the schools. Others, however, point out that many of the religious communities partially finance educational activities through funds contributed by the communities. Nonetheless, until such time as the provinces have more resources which it can invest in the schools, it is unlikely that there will be well-equipped schools, even by standards of the lesser-developed countries.

Future assistance activities in Laos will undoubtedly include a concern for the planning, finance and management of the educational system, and will include a concern for such issues as how to develop and provide effective teaching materials for the schools. At the higher education level, there will probably be some emphasis on institution building, finance and management as well. Until now, for instance, the University Pedagogical Institute has been run more or less as a collection of semi-autonomous units, each of which relates to a technical assistance program. All of these units must be molded into an institutional whole within which the units support one another and within which there are common services for all rather than resources jealously guarded by each.

Signs of change?

In both Mongolia and Laos, there appears to be a movement toward greater liberalization on the economic front. Mongolia has some tradition of dealing with the west, in that it has, for some years, welcomed hunters who wish to track down the exotic animals in the rugged mountain country. Commercial

hunting firms in the United States and Europe have arranged outings in Mongolia for serious amateur hunters for years. There is some indication that broader economic relationships with the west will be expanded to the extent that countries are willing to develop such relationships.

In Laos, the economy which a visitor sees on the streets of Vientiane appears to be closer to the free market economy of Bangkok than to the controlled economy of a socialist nation. Foreign exchange appears not to be controlled in any serious way, with dollars and other hard currencies used interchangeable in the shops and restaurants of Vientiane. Foreign beer, soft drinks, electronic goods and other non-essentials are freely available at about the same price as in Bangkok. Although it is unlikely that the party leadership will abandon its longstanding goals of encouraging cooperatives and other socialist forms of production, it appears that there will be tolerance of various free market entrepreneurial activities as well.

Laos and Mongolia differ markedly in the way the Communist party works. In Mongolia, a professional visitor is likely to be welcomed by the party chairman of the city or province being visited. There are meetings with party officials to discuss technical and professional issues. There is an apparent openness of the party apparatus which almost gives the visitor an impression that he is dealing with American-style politicians. In Laos, on the other hand, the party (Lao People's Party) maintains a secrecy which seems to hark back to the two decades (before 1975) when it had to work in a clandestine fashion.

Although the party leaders are known (and have been remarkably stable over the period since 1975), it is difficult to know the identity of the party officials connected with the various projects and institutions. When one meets an official who appears to have a position of authority in an institution but who does not seem to perform much more than a ceremonial function, one assumes that he must have something to do with the party apparatus.

All of this may gradually change. The party has been working on a constitution for the country for some years (it may be made public shortly) and appears to be in favor of including in the new constitution a variety of democratic election procedures involving universal suffrage. In addition, young, well-trained technocrats can be seen in key positions.

Finally, all of this is within the realm of speculation. Recent events in Eastern Europe and China may give cause to the party apparatus of Mongolia and Laos to put a brake on liberalization. More likely, however, is that *perestroika* and *glasnost* will continue to be infectious on the Soviet periphery and that continued major changes in each country will be inevitable.

A research agenda?

Neither Mongolia nor Laos have an extensive infrastructure to support western-style educational or social science research. Nonetheless, the universi-

ties and other institutes appear to be attempting to develop such an infrastructure.

In Laos, the Social Science Research Council has been working with scholars from around the world (both in socialist and in non-socialist countries) on a biography of Souphanouvong, one of the original founders of the party and currently ranked among the top three officials in the country. The director of the Council has expressed interest in joint projects with foreign scholars in the education area. Similarly, in Mongolia, the Rector of the Higher Pedagogical Institute in Ulan Bator has expressed interest in possible research collaboration in the future.

What are some of the questions which might be the subject of useful and interesting research? I suppose one might suggest three groups of questions: the applied, the ideological and the theoretical.

On the applied side are the usual issues of educational quantity, efficiency, quality, and relevance. Both Mongolia and Laos continue on the road of educational expansion, with an emphasis on science and technology, and with the idea that expenditures on education will, in part, fuel development. What, in fact, happens to young people who leave school at the various levels? What kinds of skills do employers see as needed by graduates at the various levels? What do villagers see as educational needs for their children? Do they simply see education as a possible way for their children to leave the village, or do they wish education to prepare children to help more effectively in running traditional occupations? What seems to be the real impact of the in-service education efforts for teachers in service? Do practices, in fact, change when the teachers return?

On the ideological side, will the party in Mongolia and Laos continue the economic and foreign policy liberalization which appears to be underway, and, if so, how will this affect the content and structure of education? Clearly, the emphasis on science and technology in the schools and universities is, to some extent, crowding out the ideological content, and one gets the impression that the substantive faculty members in universities pretty much ignore the ideological faculty. Is this impression significant?

Other theoretical issues, of course, are more difficult to handle. Cost-benefit or rate-of-return studies are likely to be problematical, especially in Laos, where salaries are so low and other measures of productivity would be difficult to define. The relevance of the curriculum to future development is a similarly complex issue which has both theoretical and practical implications. Will the new emphasis on computer skills pay off? In what ways?

To what extent is education in Mongolia and Laos truly democratic? For instance, do young people selected under the quota system from each province to enter the University Pedagogical Institute in Vientiane, have, in fact, the same success rate in getting their degrees and in ultimately finding suitable posts in teaching, industry or in government service? Or do the children from

privileged (usually urban) families, in fact, do better than those from rural areas? These are the kind of questions which are at the heart of socialist ideology, but which are sensitive to research because of the *de facto* advantages of urban children and children of party and government officials in many socialist countries.

To what extent do educational fads in the richer countries of both the socialist and capitalist countries impact on countries like Laos and Mongolia, perhaps in a dysfunctional fashion? Clearly, there are tantalizing vignettes of somewhat dated instructional materials from the west being used in teacher training in these countries. And the recent universal computer literacy goals seem to be directly imported from the Soviet Union and the west. What other evidence is there of the domination of the education systems of these countries by the major metropolitan powers?

How will the changing mix of aid donors working with these countries affect the quantity, quality and relevance of education? What dysfunctions will occur as the agencies and projects compete with one another?

For those interested in language policy and language issues as they relate to education, Laos and Mongolia are rich in possibilities. Both have numerous ethnic groups with their own ethnic languages, and both countries largely ignore these languages in favor of one national language. To what extent does this policy affect the potential of each ethnic group? In addition, there are complex problems of language which stem from the diverse nationalities of experts who help the countries, and the diverse languages of the countries to which trainees are sent. How do these language differences affect knowledge flow and integration in each country?

The one conclusion that can be made is that there is, indeed, a world system of education, with events in the center dramatically affecting the periphery. Much of what is happening in the education systems of Laos and Mongolia can be traced to reforms and innovations in countries elsewhere. Much of this borrowing may be of ideas once removed from their original source, as in the case of Hungarian-prepared manuals used in teacher education in Laos, but which include large chunks of U.S. educational material from the sixties and seventies.

Clearly, there is a rich environment in Laos and Mongolia for useful and significant educational and social science research. Both those at the center and those at the periphery in the world system of education can profit from the shared study of the problems and issues in such countries. Let us hope that *glasnost* and *perestroika* will encourage such collaboration.

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